

# Libya and the U.S. After Gaddafi

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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The U.S. intervention in Libya is continuing into its fourth month with Libyan strongman Moammar Gaddafi still clinging to power and Republicans in congress raising the question of whether the War Powers Act requires President Obama to win congressional approval for the U.S. role in the conflict. Seeing Gaddafi leave power remains the goal of the intervention and while it has not happened yet, it is certainly a real possibility that Gaddafi's days in office are winding down.

While Gaddafi's departure would be welcomed by policy makers and others in the U.S. and Europe, the question of what the U.S. role in Libya after Gaddafi, and what type of commitment the U.S. is prepared to make there is critical. It is sufficiently important that this should have been one of the major issues informing the decision of whether or not to intervene in Libya in the first place. Recent history has shown us that U.S. and NATO military powers are usually strong enough to oust nasty authoritarian leaders, but that helping those countries develop new and better political institutions, bringing stability and peace is often considerably more difficult. This has clearly been the case in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and could soon be the challenge facing Libya as well.

The initial call for intervention in Libya was based on a fear that without NATO intervention, Gaddafi would set out on a course of killing thousands of Libyans. Some even raised the specter of genocide in Libya. The chances of Gaddafi following through on his most extreme threats has fallen substantially due to the intervention, but that does not mean that Libya is now peaceful or that there is no possibility of widespread violence in Libya. On the contrary, it is easy to imagine a scenario of factional fighting and thousands of civilian deaths unfolding in post-Gaddafi Libya.

Once Gaddafi goes there will be a political vacuum in Libya not unlike what has occurred in similar situations in other countries. The anti-Gaddafi forces will demonstrate themselves to be a diverse group with a range of political views and attitudes towards the U.S. After decades of the bizarre and authoritarian rule of Gaddafi, Libya has almost no functioning or democratic political institutions and lacks civil society built on traditions of trust and cooperation between citizens. In this regard, post-Gaddafi Libya will look much like many other post-authoritarian regimes where civil conflict and violence have been part of the post-authoritarian political environment.

Additionally, as has been true of numerous other countries, a rudderless Libya stuck in political turmoil with no strong central government could further destabilize the region, become home to terrorists or otherwise create security threats for the U.S. Accordingly, there will be strong pull for the U.S. to seek to become involved in Libya as it has in other similar countries over much of the last quarter century.

All of the arguments for NATO, or the U.S., to continue to play a role in Libya after Gaddafi's almost inevitable departure, and the problems which could arise if the west simply walks away from post-Gaddafi Libya could, and in fact should, have been anticipated before the intervention began. The logic for remaining involved in Libya will be powerful, which is precisely why it should have been part of the initial calculus for deciding whether or not to intervene. There is far too much precedent for the U.S. to have simply stumbled into a long term commitment in Libya, yet that appears to be a very real possibility.

This raises an interesting and abstract question about how the U.S. has so completely mastered the ability to believe in best case scenarios thus making the same mistakes over and over, but it also raises a very practical question about what the U.S. should do in Libya to avoid an expensive, long term commitment which may not end well. Unfortunately neither the abstract nor practical question has an easy answer.